SIDE STORY

Hatred in Hue

Hoang Gia Minh was an outstanding student from Hue who graduated at the top of his class and had been selected to study engineering in Hanoi. At the University of Science and Technology, he became close friends with Hung because of his lively and energetic personalities. Minh had an older sister named Nguyen Thi Hong Anh, who was a teacher in Hue.

Early 1968, when the Tet Offensive took place, Hue became a fierce battlefield. Minh's family luckily escaped the city when the Viet Cong poured in and arrived in the North in time.

Minh received terrible news via express mail. His parents wrote, in tears: Hong Anh was not as fortunate as they were. She was discovered to be a teacher who had worked under the Saigon government and was arrested. Immediately, Minh asked for leave from school and took the express train to Hue. Before leaving, Minh met Hung at a quiet cafe in Hanoi. He made a serious proposal:

Minh: "I'm going back on a trip to Hue. Do you wanna go, Hung?"

Hung: (Laughed) "Go to Hue? You want to enjoy yourself so soon? Save it for when the country is unified, then we'll go! But what are you going on this trip for? To visit relatives?"

Minh: (Voice lowered) "Not to visit relatives. I want... I want you to come with me to the south. I won't study anymore. I will join the South Vietnamese Army."

Hung: (Slammed at table) "What are you saying? The South Vietnamese Army? Are you insane, Minh? We are Northern students, are Uncle Ho's children! They are lackeys of the American empire; can't you see their true colors?"

Minh: "Do you know what news I just received? My sister Hong Anh... she's dead. The Liberation Army

came in, they said she was a South Vietnamese soldier and took her away. My parents found her..."

Hung: (Face fell, but still tried to maintain stance) "Minh, calm down. That's war! It's definitely caused by the US-backed regime and blaming us. We are liberating the nation! Don't let propaganda blind you!"

Minh: (Stood up, staring with a cold gaze) "You call my sister war? You call her death propaganda? I don't believe in Communism anymore. The ones who killed my sister are the very people you worship who call themselves the Liberators. I will return to the South, don the soldier's uniform, and take revenge on those who massacred my family. Stay here and keep dreaming, Hung!"

Minh turned and walked away, leaving Hung stunned with anger, disappointment, and doubt.

Upon arriving in Hue, Minh witnessed horrific devastation. Many neighborhoods were ruined by bombs and fires. But what broke Minh's heart was visiting the hastily buried site of his sister.

The blood had dried, but the scene still reeked of the death stench. Hong Anh was found buried in a mass grave. When his parents tried to dig her up, Minh clearly saw her body with her hands bound behind her back with barbed wire. Her beautiful face was smashed and disfigured beyond recognition. There was a fatal wound on her head, probably from a pickaxe or shovel.

The gruesome scene of his kind and loving sister being brutally murdered by those who called themselves liberators froze Hoang Gia Minh's heart. He hugged his sister's corpse, his tears dried up, leaving only the fire of hatred. This personal vendetta completely replaced the ideals of studying and the patriotic spirit he had once possessed in the North.

With his high level of education and excellent physical fitness, Hoang Gia Minh easily joined the elite Parachute Division of the South Vietnamese Army. He quickly rose through the ranks and became a brave and stoic young officer.

On the 37th night at the Citadel, the air was thick with the smell of gunpowder and death. Hoang Gia Minh, now an officer in the elite

Parachute Division, received a special mission: to secretly climb the citadel walls and plant the flag of the Republic of Vietnam to create a psychological advantage for the peace talks in Paris.

In the dim light, Minh moved stealthily, his hand gripping the flagpole tightly. Just then, Hung – his old friend from the University – was guarding the A2 outpost. A small noise caused by Hung accidentally dropping a stone caught Minh's attention. As Hung reached the top, a dark figure lunged forward. It was Minh. A brutal close-quarters battle ensued.

Minh, with the lightning-fast reflexes of a paratrooper, swung his arm and delivered a vicious hook punch to Hung's ribs. Hung stumbled but immediately used the

butt of his rifle to block the dagger Minh had just drawn. The two wrestled, their heavy breathing mingling with the clang of metal. Minh spun around, delivered a kick that sent Hung crashing against a crumbling brick wall. Minh's eyes now held no trace of humanity, only the burning fire of hatred stemming from the memory of his sister Hong Anh's murder in Hue.

Hung, suppressing his pain, lunged forward, grabbed Minh around the waist, and forcefully pushed him against the wall. Just then, a flare shot up, illuminating both their faces.

-“Hoang Gia Minh...?" – Hung exclaimed, so shocked that he let go of his hand.

-"Hung?" – Minh's gaze froze for a split second.

Hung's hesitation was Minh's opportunity. Recalling the image of his sister bound with barbed wire, Minh gritted his teeth and delivered a powerful headbutt to Hung's face, stunning him. Minh swung his knife, intending to finish off the "man who called himself a liberator," but the cry of the wounded soldier on Thach Han River from the days echoed in Hung's mind: "The Citadel is waiting for us!"

The power of duty outweighed their old friendship. Hung dodged the knife by a hair's breadth, then, using all his strength, he spun around and thrust his bayonet straight into Minh's stomach. Minh recoiled, a choked groan escaped his throat. Hung didn't stop; he unleashed a

furious kick to Minh's chest, sending him tumbling from the two-meter-high citadel wall to the ground.

Under the moonlight and gunfire, Hung looked down at the motionless body of his friend and the blood-stained flag. He whispered bitterly:

-"You're filthier than even the South Vietnamese, Hoang Gia Minh...".

The encounter ended in blood and a permanent separation, just as war had torn apart their student dreams.

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